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VNDER KING CONSTANTINE

[Trask, Kate (Michels)]

UNDER KING CONSTANTINE

NEW-YORK: ANSON D. F. RANDOLPH AND
COMPANY (INCORPORATED), 182 FIFTH AVENUE

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"Then sir Constantine, which was sir Cadors son of Cornewaile, was chosen king of England; and hee was a full noble knight, and worshipfully hee ruled this realm."

SIR THOMAS MALORY, "*La Mort d'Arthure.*"

WOR 20JUN34

SANPEUR.

KATHANAL.

CHRISTALAN.

SANPEUR.

SANPEUR.

THE great King Constantine is at the hunt;
The brilliant cavalcade of knights and dames,
On palfreys and on chargers trapped in gold
And silver and red purple, ride in mirth
Along the winding way, by hill and tarn
And violet-sprinkled dell. Impatient hounds
Sniff the keen morning air, and startled birds
Rustle the foliage redolent with spring.

From time to time some courtier reins his steed
Beside the love-enkindling Gwendolaine,
Whose wayward moods do vary as the winds,—
Now wooing with her soft, seductive grace;
Now fascinating with her stately pride;

Anon, bewitching by her recklessness
Of wilful daring in some wild caprice
Which no one could anticipate or stay.
How fair she is to-day! How beautiful!
Her hunting-robe is bluer than the sky,—
Matching one phase of her great, changeful eyes,—
Clasped with twin falcons of unburnished gold,
The colour of her brown hair in the sun.
The white plumes, drooping from her hunting-cap,
Leave her alluring lips in tempting sight,
But hide the growing shadow in her eyes.
For she marks none of all the court to-day
Save Sir Sanpeur, the passing noble knight
Whose bearing doth bespeak heroic deeds,
There where he rides with the sweet maid Ettonne.

Sir Torm, the husband of fair Gwendolaine,
Is all unconscious of aught else beside

The outward seeming; 'tis enough for him
That she is gay and beautiful, and smiles.
He has a nature small and limited
By sight, and sense, and self, and his desires;
A heart as open as the day to all
That touches his quick impulse, when it costs
Him naught of sacrifice. The needy poor
Flock to his castle for the careless gift
Of falling dole; but his esquire is faint
From his exacting service, night and day.
His Lady Gwendolaine is satiate
With costly gems, palfreys, and samite thick
With threads of gold and silver; but the sweet
Heart-subtleties and fair observances
Are lost in the *of course* of married life.
He sees, too quickly, does she fail to smile,
But never sees the shadow in her eyes.
His hounds are beaten till they scarce draw breath,

And then caressed beyond the worth of hounds.
His vassals know not if, from day to day,
He will approve, or strike them with a curse.
His humours are the byword of the court,
And, were it not for his good-heartedness,
His prowess, and undaunted strength at arms,
Men would speak lightly of him in disdain;
He is so often in a stormy rage,
Or supplicating humour to atone,—
Too petty to repent in very truth,
Too light and yielding in repentance, when
His temper's force is spent, for dignity
Of truest knighthood. No one feels his faults
So quickly, with such flushing of regret
And shame, as Gwendolaine. But she is wife,
His honour is her own, and she would hide
From all the world, and even from herself,
His pettiness and narrowness of soul.

So she forgets, or doth pretend forget,
Where he has failed, save when he passes bounds;
Then her swift scorn—a piercing force he dreads—
Flashes upon him like a probing lance,
To silence merriment if it be coarse,
To hush his wrath when it is violent.

Though powerful to check, she ne'er could change
The underflow and current of their life.
In the first years, gone by, ere she had grown
A woman of the world, she had essayed
To stem the tide of shallow vanity,
To realise her girlhood's high ideal,
And make her home more reverent, and more fine.
Sir Torm had overborne her words with jest
And noisy laughter, vowing she would learn
Romance and sweet simplicity were well
For harper minstrel, singing in the hall,

But not for courtiers living in the world.
Once, when she faced the thought of motherhood,—
For some brief days of sweet expectancy
Never fulfilled for her,— she was aware
Of thirst for living water, and a dread
Of the light, shallow life she led, fell on her;
She went to Torm, and spoke, in broken words,
The unformed longing of her dawning soul.
He lightly laughed, filliped her ear, called her
"My Lady Abbess," "pretty saint," and then
Said, later, jesting, before all the court,
"Behold a lady too good for her lord!"
The blood swept up her cheeks to lose itself
In her hair's gold, then ebbed again to leave
Her paler than before. She stood in silent,
Momentary hate of Torm, all impotent.
He saw her pallor and her eyes down-dropt,
Came quickly, flung his arm around her, saying,

"God's faith, my girl, you do not mind a jest!
Where are the spirits you are wont to have?"
"My lord, they shall not fail you any more,"
She answered bitterly, and after that
Torm did not see her soul unveiled again.
Thenceforth she turned her strivings after truth
To winning outward charm the more complete,
And hid her inner self more deeply 'neath
The sparkling surface of her brilliant life.

To-day he wearies her with brutal jest
Upon the hunted boar, and calls her dull
That she laughs not as ever.

While Sanpeur
Was far upon a distant quest, all perilous,
She thought with secret longing of the hour
When once again together they should ride.

He has returned triumphant, having won
Fresh honours.

Now at last, the hunt has come,
The day is golden, and her beauty fair,—
And Sir Sanpeur is riding with Ettonne.
A sudden conflict wages in her heart
As she talks lightly to each courtier gay;
Jealous impatience that the Gwendolaine
Whom all men flatter, should be thwarted, fights
A tender yearning to defy all pride
And call him to her for one spoken word.
The world seems better when he talks with her;
No one has ever lifted her above
The empty nothings of a courtly life
As Sir Sanpeur, who makes both life and death
More grandly solemn, yet more simply clear.

SANPEUR.

In a steep curving of the road, he turns
To meet her smile, which deepens as he comes.
Sanpeur, bronzed by the eastern sun, is tall,
Straight as a javelin; in each noble line
His knighthood is revealed. Slighter than Torm,
Whose strength is in his size, but full as strong,
Sanpeur's unrivalled strength is in his sinew.
His scarlet garb, deep-furred with miniver,
Is broidered with the cross which leaves untold
The fame he won in lands of which it tells.
Upon his breast he wears the silver dove,
The sacred Order of the Holy Ghost,
Which Gwendolaine once noted with the words,
"What famous honours you have won, my lord!"
And he had answered with all knightly grace,
"My Lady Gwendolaine, I seldom think
Of the high honour, though I greatly prize

This recognition, far beyond my worth;
My thought is ever what it signifieth.
It is my consecration. I belong
To God the Father, and this is the sign
Of His most Holy Spirit, sent to us
By our ascended Saviour, Jesu Christ,
By Whom alone I live from day to day."
His quiet words, amid the laughing court,
Had startled her, as if a solemn peal
Of full cathedral music had rung clear
Above the jousting cry of "Halt and Ho!"
Then, as she wondered if he were a man
Like other men, or priest in knightly garb,
He spoke of her rich jewels with delight
And worldly wisdom, telling her the tale
Of many jewelled mysteries she wore.
"In the far East, the sapphire stone is held
To be the talisman for Love and Truth,

So is it fitly placed upon your robe;
It is the stone of stones to girdle you."
"A man, indeed," she thought, "but not like men."

As on his foam-flecked charger, Carn-Aflang,
He rides to-day towards Lady Gwendolaine,
She draws her rein more tightly, arching more
Her palfrey's head, and all unconsciously
Uplifts her own,—for she has waited long.

"Good morrow, my fair Lady Gwendolaine."

"Good morrow, Sir Sanpeur; pray do you
mark
My new gerfalcon, from beyond the sea?
Your eyes are just the colour of her wings."

"Now, by my troth, I challenge any knight
To say precisely what that colour is."

"'T is there the likeness serves so well, Sanpeur."

"My Lady Gwendolaine, your speech is, far
Beyond your purpose, gracious, for right well
I mind me that you told me, once, your heart
Often rebelled against the well-defined;
And I should be content to have my eyes
The motley colour of your falcon's plume,
Lest they make you rebel."

"Ah, Sir Sanpeur,
Your memory is far too steadfast!"

"Naught
Can be too steadfast for your grace, fair dame."

Now he has come, the wayward Gwendolaine
Is fain to punish him for his delay.
"Methinks," she says, in pique, against her will,

"The beautiful Ettonne looks for her knight;
It scarce seems chivalrous to leave her thus."

"'T is true, my lady, I came not to stay,
But for a greeting, which I now have said."

He left her; the light shadow darker grew
Within her eyes; and golden hawking bells
Upon her jesses clashed with sudden clink,
As her fair hand had closed impatiently.

Betimes came Constantine, who looked a man
Of hard-won conquests, not the least, o'er self.
Before his stately presence Gwendolaine
Bowed low with heartfelt loyalty.

"My King,
Care rides beside you; banish him, to-day,
He will but spoil the sunshine and the hunt."

"Alas! he is the Sovereign of the King,
And stays, defying all command, fair Gwendolaine."
Then, smiling grimly,—"My great heritage,
As heir to fragments of the Table Round,
Brings me no wealth of ease."

In converse light
They rode together. When the hunt was done,
The King, all courteous, said, "My gracious dame,
Well have you learned of nature her great laws;
The sun, that warms with its intensity
The earth to fruitage, is the same that throws
Stray sportive gleams to beautify alone;
And you, who meet my purposes of state
With a responsive thought and sympathy,
As no dame of the court,—and scarcely knight,—
Has ever done, are first in making me
Forget their weight. Gramercy for your grace!

It has revived me as a summer shower
Revives the parched and under-trodden grass;
It is but seldom I have time to seek
Refreshment, save of labour changed."

"My King,"—
She passed from gay to grave,—"my own heart aches
With life's vexed questions, and its stern demands,
Full often even in my sheltered state;
And you, my liege, must be well-nigh o'ercome
With the vast load of duties you fulfil
So nobly, to the glory of the realm.
Would I could serve you, as you well deserve;
But I am only woman, so I smile
In lieu of fighting for you, as I would
Unto the death, if I were but a knight."

And this same dame who spoke so earnestly
To Constantine, said when she next had speech
With Sir Sanpeur, "Life is a merry play
To me, naught else; I seldom think beyond
The fashion of the robe I wear!"

Sanpeur,
Alone of all the men who came within
Her circle, varied not at smiles or frowns;
And when he would not humour passing mood,
And when she felt within her wayward heart
The silent protest of his calm reserve,—
Although a longing she had never known
Awoke in her,—her pride, in arms, cried truce
To striving spirit, and she laughed the more.
And oftentimes the stirring of new life,
Without its recognition, made her quick
To war against the wall that Sir Sanpeur

Confronted to some phases of her charm;
Made her assume a wilful shallowness,
To hide the soul she was afraid to face.

One day, at court, her restless spirits rose
To a defiant mood of recklessness;
And half because she wanted to be true,
And half because she could not act the false
Except to overdo it, her clear laugh
Rang out at witty words her heart disdained;
Some knights, ignoble, hating noble men,
Were loud decrying virtue; Gwendolaine
With laugh-begetting words made quick assent
To the unworthy wit.

She scarce had spoken,
Ere Sanpeur raised his penetrating eyes,—
The only ones, in all that laughing group,
Which were not bright with an approving smile,—

To meet her own, with silent gravity,
A swift arrest within their shining depths
To one more word unworthy of herself.
And Gwendolaine, the peerless queen of dames,
Cast down her eyes, for once, before Sanpeur.

Later, he stood beside her, as she passed,
"My Lady Gwendolaine, — incomparable,—
'T is not your wont to be so cowardly."

"No? Sanpeur," answered Gwendolaine, "nor yours,
It seems, to be well mannered; may I ask
Where I have failed in bravery, forsooth?"

"You were a coward to your better self
In your light answer to the empty words
Your nature disavowed."

"Alack, my lord!
That is my armour; warriors ever wear

A cuirass of strong steel before their breasts;
A woman carries but a little shield
Of scorn and badinage, to break the force
On her weak woman-heart, of javelins hurled."

"That is well said, my Lady Gwendolaine,
But it is not the same, by your fair grace;
Our armour is our armour, nothing more;
Your shield of scorn is lasting lance of harm,
For every word a noble woman says,
And every act and influence from her,
Live on forever, to the end of time;
Your true soul is too true to be belied."

"Who told you, Sir Sanpeur?"

"My heart," he said.

She raised her eyes in a triumphant thrill
Of sudden rapture, and of gratitude,

And saw herself enwrapped by a long look
That came from deeper depths than she had known,
And reached a depth in her as yet unstirred.
She stood enspelled by his long silent gaze
Of subtle power. His unswerving eyes
Quelled her by steadfast calm, yet kindled her
By lavish love and light.

Although no word
Was said between them, as they moved apart,
She knew he loved her, and he wist she knew.

And with the revelation there was born
A wider knowledge of life's mystery.
Sir Torm had never satisfied her soul;
But though in outward seeming she was proud,
High-spirited, and passing courtly dame,
At heart the Lady Gwendolaine was still

A hungry child who craved love's nourishing,
Unconscious of her hunger; so she had clung,—
In spite of shocks, repeated time on time,—
Close to the thought of Torm, remembering all
He was to her in wooing her; rehearsed—
As children count their pennies one by one
Day after day to prove their wealth — each good
And sign of promise in his nature generous,
Until her buoyant heart, quick to react,
Had warmed itself, and kept itself alive,
By its own warmth and fire of earnest zeal.
And as men, lost in a morass, feed fast
On berries, lest they starve, and call it food,
Thus, with shut eyes, had Gwendolaine, till now,
Fed on affection and chance tenderness,
And called it by the great and awful name
Of Love, not knowing what love meant. But swift
As light floods darkened chamber, when one flings

The window wide, so her unconscious soul
Was flooded with the strange incoming thought—
In that eternal moment—of true love,
Love as a vital force within the soul,
A strength, a power, an illuming light.
And Sanpeur loved her! O immortal crown!
She was not conscious of her love for him,
Her love for his love was enough for her.

Then she awoke to joy; all things became
Pregnant with deep significance. The sky
Flushed with the coming of the rosy dawn;
The mountains reaching heavenward; the sun
That warmed the flowers, and drank their dew; the birds
That built their nests well hid in leafy shade;
The grass that bent in homage to the wind,—
All touched her heart anew with subtle thoughts;
And joy brought rich unfolding in her life.

She had more pity for the men she scorned,
More quick forgiveness for the envious dames,
And when the little children crossed her path,
She stooped, and kissed them, as was not her wont.

Alas! too often, this new harmony
Of life was clashed by discord. Sir Torm flung
Upon the homage Sanpeur rendered her
Unworthy jest and spiteful words, for well
He hated him with grudge despiteous.
Full oft his wrath was roused to such a point
He could not hold his peace; even to the King
He jeered one day at visionary knights.
The keen-eyed King, with intuition, knew
The motive of his speech,—"Our knight, Sanpeur,
But contradicts your verdict, Torm, and proves
That which the great King Arthur taught,— the man
Is strongest who can claim a strength divine

From whence to draw his own." Sir Torm had grown
More wrathful in his heart at this, and kept
Sanpeur long while from word with Gwendolaine.
Then, when Torm's anger did not baffle her,
Sometimes a doubt would come, and doubt hides joy.
Sir Sanpeur honoured her before the court
With chivalrous and frankest loyalty.
At the great tournament of Christmas-tide,
He cried, "Such peerless presence in our midst
As the unrivalled Lady Gwendolaine
Strengthens the arm to prove her without peer!
Let him who will dispute it!" Those who did,
But proved it by their fall, for worshipfully
He overthrew them with so simple ease
His cause seemed justice rather than love's boast.
Then when they met for converse face to face,
He spoke from his unsullied, fearless soul
Straight to her own, without reserve or fear.

Yet he was wrapped in a calm self-control;
No word, no whisper of his love for her
Had ever passed his lips to tell, in truth,
The love that she was sure of in her heart.
And when he lingered by some maiden fair,
With that true-hearted careful courtesy
He never for a moment's space forgot
To any woman, queen or serving-maid;
And when the maiden's eyes gave bright response
To his fair words of thought-betaking grace,
The heart of Gwendolaine would faster beat,
And all her waywardness would quick return;
Then, if Sanpeur approached her, she would mock
At life, and love, and fling the gauntlet down
As challenge for a tournament of speech.

"And pray, Sanpeur," she said one eve to him,
When they were at a feast at Camelot,

"Why is your life so lone and incomplete,
When any lovely maiden of the court
Would follow you most gladly at your call?"

"You know full well, my Lady Gwendolaine."

"By your kind grace, I cannot guess," she said,
Repenting as she said it, instantly.

"Because I love you only, evermore;
You long have felt it, known it; and I thought
Cared not to hear me say it with my voice;
But, as you wish it, I have said it now,
My Lady Gwendolaine."

They stood among
The knights and ladies, therefore he spoke low,
In quiet dignity, as he might say
"How well the colour of your robe beseems
Your beauty";—not a trace of passionate

Intensity, save in his lucent eyes.
No passion nor embrace could so have moved her,
As this calm telling her in quiet words
The secret of all secrets in God's world,
As though it were a part of daily life;
This power to hold a passion in his hand,—
Which his true eyes declared was measureless,—
As though he were its master, utterly.
True women are like Nature, their great mother,
Stirred on the surface by each passing wind,
But ruled by silent forces at the heart.
She caught her breath a moment in surprise,—
For naught has to the mind more of surprise
Than the sweet long-expected, if it come
When one expects it not,—and paused a space,
With downcast eyes; and then her woman-soul
Went out in sudden impulse, graciously,
In boundless thought for him who gave her all.

"O Sanpeur, love one worthier than I,
And where your love will not be guerdonless!"

"To love you is a guerdon of itself,
You are so well worth loving, Gwendolaine."

He passed with knightly bow, and joined the court,
And left her with a glory in her eyes.
Never was Gwendolaine so radiant
As on that evening; courtiers one by one
Drew near, and marvelled at her loveliness.
When the great feast was ended, she was well
Content to leave the court for Tormalot;
For, in the quiet of her chamber, when
Sir Torm had slept, she lived in thought again
The sure triumphant moment when she knew,
Beyond all peradventure, of a love
That her heart told her was above all love
Of other men in strength and purity.

And on the morrow, when she woke, her joy
Woke with her, and encompassèd her soul.

In strides Sir Torm, equipped for tournament.
The Lady Gwendolaine goes not to-day,
For it will be a savage tournament,
"Unfit for ladies," Torm had said to her,
"Unworthy men," she thought, but did not say.

"Come, Gwendolaine, my beauty, ere I go,
I wait to have you buckle on my sword."

Smiling, she does his bidding.

"Ah! my Torm,
How heavy, and how mighty is your sword;
I revel in the glory of your strength,
And in your prowess. Well I mind me, dear,
When first I saw you, on your charger black,

Riding in knightly state to my old home.
'By our King Arthur's soul,' my father said,
'There is a knight of valour and of strength!'
And then you wooed me to become your bride,
Me, scarce a maiden, naught but wilful child
So prone, alas! to mischief and mistake;
Of humble fortune, with but whims for dower.
You were so kind, so generous, you flashed
My low estate with splendour. I recall
How my heart laughed with girlish pride and glee
At the surpassing bounty of your gifts."

"Ha! Gwendolaine, by the great Holy Grail
I caught an eagle when I caught that dove,
For now you are the queen of all the dames;
Even King Constantine, who seldom marks
A lady of the court, comes to your side
And flatters you with royal courtesies,

Which you receive with far too proud a grace;
For, wit ye well, I would not let it slip,
This honour of his preference for you."

"My lord, save that I reverence him as man,
I do not care for favour of the King."

"I care; that is enough for you," said Torm.
"No knight has charger like my Roanault,
No knight has castle like my Tormalot,
And none has mistress like my Gwendolaine—
I choose that none approach her but the King."

He laughed a loud and taunting laugh, and turned
And kissed her with a loud resounding kiss.

"I think the King is safe for you, and well
For me in my advancement. Other knights
May serve you at a distance, but had best
Not seek your side too often."

Her sweet head
Lay like a lily on his mailèd breast,
While she toyed lightly with the yellow scarf
That floated from his helmet.

"Goes Sanpeur
To the great tournament to-day?" he asked.

"I think not, Torm; it never is his wont
To tilt in tourneys like to-day's."

"Think not!
I want an honest answer. Do you know?"

"No more than I have told you, my Sir Torm;
It scarce becomes his chivalry to fight
In these new tourneys of such savage guise."

"His chivalry! Now God defend! Methinks
You are too daring. What of mine, forsooth?"

"I long have told you that I thought your strength
Was worthy finer service. You well know
I like not tournaments that waste the land
By useless bloodshed; but, my Torm, you are
Your own adviser, so I say no more.
Bend down and kiss me, Torm, before you go;
Pray be not wroth with Gwendolaine, my lord."

"Kiss you I will, if you can tell me true
You will not see that coward knight to-day."

Back drew she from his breast, and said in scorn,
"I know not whom you mean, my lord Sir Torm."

"Tell me no lies," said Torm; "I mean Sanpeur."

"Sanpeur, the fearless knight, a coward! — *he?*
What, think you, would your great King Constantine
Say to your daring slander? Sir Sanpeur
Is the unquestioned Launcelot at court;

The King rests on him with unfailing trust
In every valiant deed and feat of arms."
She drew her beauty to its fullest height,
And swept him with her eyes. "Fear not for me,
Sir Torm. Sanpeur, alas! is too engrossed
With duties for his Master, Jesu Christ,
And for his lord, the King, to loiter here
With any woman, howe'er fair she be."

Torm laughed a quick and scornful laugh, that made
The heart of Gwendolaine beat fast and fierce
Against its sound in spirit of revolt.

"Pray who was coward when Sanpeur refused
In open court to joust with Dinadan?"

"You know, my lord, the reason that he gave."

"Ha, ha! some empty boast of holy day,
And prayers, and fasting, and such foolery."

"And who, my lord," she said in sudden scorn,
"Unhorsed once, years ago, the brave Sir Torm,
Who never was unhorsed by knight before?"

The hot blood flushed his heavy-bearded face;
His loud voice vibrated with rising wrath.

"So your fine, fearless knight of chivalry
Has won his way to your most wifely heart
By boasting of his prowess! By my sword!
That is a knightly virtue in all truth."

"It did not need, Sir Torm, that he should tell
The story that was waiting for your bride
In every prattling mouth about the court.
Had it been so, she never would have heard;
It lies with petty souls alone to boast,
Not with the royal soul of Sir Sanpeur."

"Now, by the blessed Mother of our Lord!
Methinks you love this valiant knight, Sanpeur."

"And if I did," she cried, her soul aglow
With exultation of defense of him,
"It well might be my glory; for there lives
No knight so stainless and so pure as he."

"Peace, wanton!" said Sir Torm. "It is your shame!"

And lifting his strong heavy mailèd hand,
He struck the lovely face of Gwendolaine,
And went out cursing.

Motionless she leaned
Against the window mullion, where she reeled,
White as the pearls she wore; and love for Torm—
The thing that she had nourished and called love—
Fell dead within her, murdered by his blow.

And in her heart true love arose at last
For Sir Sanpeur, proclaiming need of him;—
A love, for many days hushed and suppressed
By wifely loyalty, now well awake,
With conscious sense of immortality.

Half dazed, she swiftly to her chamber went,
Stopped not to wipe the blood from her pale cheek;
Dropped off, in haste, her brilliant robe, and donned
A russet gown she kept for merry plays,
And, wrapping o'er her head a wimple, dark
As her dark gown, crept down the castle steps.
The vassals looked at her askance; she drew
Her wimple closer, and deceived their gaze,
Until the gate of Tormalot was passed,
And she was out upon the lonely moor.
Onward she went, too wrenched with pain and wrath
To fear, or wonder at her fearlessness.

The knight Sanpeur was on his battlements,
Silvered with light from the full summer moon,
And heard his seneschal with loud replies
Denying entrance, as his orders were;
He would be left alone and undisturbed
With memory and thought of Gwendolaine.
"What sweetness infinite beneath the ebb
And flow of moods," he said, half audibly;
"What truth beneath her laughter and her mirth!
I ask but that her nature be fulfilled,
That is enough for me; it matters not
If I may only see her from afar.
My love was sent to vivify her life,
Not to imperil, and to make no claim
Of her but her unfolding; to remind
Her soul of its immortal heritage,
And teach her joy,—she knew but merriment.
And this, meseems, it hath done, Christ be praised!

Her soul asserts itself through her gay life,
And joy pervades her,—she is radiant.
How wonderful she looked, last night, at
Camelot!
She moved in glowing beauty like a star."

And with the vision of her in his heart,
In all the splendour of her state and pride,
In golden-threaded samite strewn with pearls,
He turned, in the quick pacing of his walk,
And faced her in her simple russet gown,
Her hair unbound, and blowing in the wind,
Her cheeks as colourless as white May flowers,
Save on the one a deep and crimson stain.
"My God!" he cried, and caught her as she fell.

She told the story of her bitter wrong
In poignant words of passionate disdain.

"And I have come straightway to you, Sanpeur,—
Having more faith in your true love for me
Than any woman ever had before
In love of man, or chivalry of knight,—
To tell you that I love you more than life.
Long have I loved you, well I know it now,
Although I knew it not, until this blow
Stamped it in blood upon my mind and soul.
I rose this morn resolved to be more true
To your high thought of womanhood, and wife,
To bear with Torm more patiently, and strive
To make my life more worthy of your love;
And then,— God help me,— my resolve was crushed
By Torm's fierce hand, and love for you set free.
Yea, now my heart is sure,— beyond all doubt,
Beyond all question and all fear of men,—
That I, for ever, love you utterly.
Take me, beloved, I am yours, I want,

I need, I pant, I tremble for your care.
O meet me not so coldly! I shall die
If you repulse me; I have come so far
And fast, without a fear,—I loved you so,—
To seek the blessed shelter of your arms.
My brain is dizzy, and my senses fail;
For God's sake tell me you are glad I came
To you—and only you—in my despair."

He took her hands, full tenderly, and said,—
His eyes alone embracing her the while,—
"Beloved Gwendolaine, loved far above
All women on the earth, loved with a love
That words would but conceal, were they essayed,
Soul of my soul, and spirit of myself,
If I am cold, you know it is in truth
A cold that burns more deeply than all fire.
Deep-stirred am I that you could trust me so,

And you will trust me yet, dear, when I say
You must go back to your brave lord, Sir Torm."

"Back to Sir Torm!" she said, in a half dream.
"O Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Christ!
Save me and keep me from the bitter shame
Of such humiliation to my soul."

"No deed done for the right, my Gwendolaine,
Can bring humiliation to a soul.
Sir Torm has loved you long and loyally—"

"He knows not how to love," she said in scorn.

"He knows his way, and in it loves you well;
Your wit and beauty are his chiefest pride;
He would refuse you nothing you could ask
To gratify your pleasure and desire.
He brought you from a narrow, hidden lot,
To share with you his honours at the court.

You will not let all that be wiped away
By one swift deed of anger, which Sir Torm
Has bitterly repented and bewailed
Full long ere this; of that you are right sure,
Because you know his loving heart's rebound."

"To live with him, Sanpeur, would now be death."

"Naught can bring death to immortality
But sin,— and life with me, my Gwendolaine,
Would be the death of all we hold most high."

"Jesu have mercy! Sanpeur casts me off;
He does not love me! I have dreamed it all."

Sanpeur said almost sternly, "Gwendolaine,
Unsay that; it is false! You know full well
How far I love you above thought of self;
If I *half* loved you, I would fold you close."

"It is unsaid, Sanpeur; but woe is me

That I should fall so far from my estate
To plead in vain with any man, howe'er
He love; where is my pride, my boasted pride?"

"'T is in my heart, if anywhere, my love."

"I can not go, Sanpeur. Torm forfeited
His right to loyalty by cruelty."

"The debt of loyalty is due to self,
And we must well fulfil it, Gwendolaine,
No matter how another may have failed."

A sudden horror crossed her thought,—"Sanpeur,
You do not love me less that I have come?"

"Ah! my beloved woman-child, I know
Your many-sided nature far too well
To judge you or condemn you by one act,
Born of a frenzied moment of despair;
When the true Gwendolaine has time to think,

Naught I could urge would keep her, though she
came."

"But Torm would kill me if I did return"—

"Leave that to me; but if he should, my love,
Your soul would then be free,— what ask you more?
Now you are weary, very weary, sweet;
Go in the castle, let me call my dames
To tend and serve you until morning light;
And on the morrow you will choose to go
With me, I am full sure, and make your peace
With Torm, as worthy of your better self."

"With you? O God! Sanpeur, if I return,
I go alone as I have come! Think you
That I would take you with me to your death?"

"My life is yours,— how use it better, dear,
Than winning peace and happiness for you?"

"But it would be keen misery for life"—

"It leadeth unto happiness and peace
In the far future, if we fail not now.
This life is but the filling of a trust,
To prove us worthy of the life beyond,
And happiness is never to be sought.
If it comes,—well; if not, we shall know why,
When we are happy in the sight of God."

Then there was silence on the battlements;
No sound was heard but the slow measured clang
Of feet that paced the stony path below;—
Gwendolaine pushed aside the wind-blown hair
From her wild eyes, and gazed into Sanpeur's.
As the slow minutes passed the frenzied mood
Faded away from her like fevered dream;
With hands clasped in a passion of devout,

Complete surrender, falling at his feet
She whispered, brokenly, between her sobs;

"Sanpeur, I will go back to Torm,—for you,—
Go back and live my life as best I may,
If he forgive me;—and if not, receive
The condemnation of my fault as meet.
Your love has done what love should ever do,—
Illumined duty's path, and its far goal,
Hid for a moment by a dark despair.
I thought I loved you perfectly before,
But my soul tells me, deep below the pain,
I love you more than if you bade me stay."

He took her hands and kissed them tenderly
With quiet kisses, long and calm, which held
Sure promise of the strength he fain would give;
Then, bending o'er her yearningly, he said

In tones that stilled her spirit into rest,
"God guard you, my beloved, evermore."
A new force flowed into her soul from his.

She rose and left him.

He gave orders strict
For her best comfort; then walked out alone,
To meet and wrestle with his passion, held
So long in leash by honour, free at last
With overmastering and giant strength.
The subtle fragrance of her hands pervades
His senses; in his veins he feels the flow
Of her warm breath, which entered into them
That moment he had caught her as she fell;
Her words of love sweep like a surging tide
Across the quiet of his self-control.
When she was there, his love for her had kept

His passion from uprising, though against
His pleading heart, so long her pleading seemed.
Now she is gone, all calm and thought are lost
In the impassioned wish for her, the thirst
To drink the sweetness of her deep, rich soul,
Without a thought of Torm, or all the world.
Sanpeur's well-rounded nature is triune,
And flesh and sense as much a part of him
As his clear brain and spirit consecrate.
Passion for once asserts itself; he starts,
And towards the castle strides with rapid steps;
"She is my own, Fate sent her here to me;
I cannot war against it any more;
I will go in and fold her to myself."

He clasps his empty arms upon his breast,
In the abandonment of wild desire,
And feels, beneath the pressure of his hands,

The sacred Order of the Holy Ghost.
"Good Lord, deliver me from sin," he cries,
And bows his knightly head in silent prayer.

No earnest soul can ask and not receive:
Before the warden's deep-toned voice calls out
Another watch, Sanpeur has overcome.

He passed his night beneath the silent stars,
Below the resting-room of Gwendolaine,
Who lay within his castle, loving him,
While he kept watch, to guard her from himself.

Just ere the morning light, there was a cry
From his most faithful seneschal to rouse
The vassals to defend the brave Sanpeur,
Loved loyally; and from the battlements
He saw Sir Torm, waging a savage fight
To win an entrance through his castle gate.

With hurried steps he reached the gate, and with
The cry,— drowned by the din of clashing arms,—
"Withhold! it is a friend," he threw himself
Before Sir Torm, and took the mortal wound
That had been aimed by his own seneschal.

"Let fighting cease; hurt not Sir Torm!" he cried,
And fell into the arms of grim old Ule,
Who pierced his own soul when he wounded him.

A sudden sound of wailing rent the court;
The dames flocked from the castle in dismay,
And with them came the Lady Gwendolaine,
A pace or two, and then stood motionless;
Her limbs, that brought her quickly to confront
The evil she had wrought, grew powerless;
Her wide, tense gaze was as of one who walks
In sleep unseeing; her dishevelled hair

Veiled the abandon of her dress; her cheeks
Were colourless as marble, but for the stain
Of crimson. Paralysed and dumb she stood,
Too far to reach him, but full near to hear,
As Sanpeur, having lifted hand to hush
The wailing, broke the silence rapidly,
Like one who feels his time for speech is short.

"In Christ's dear name, who alway doth forgive,
I pray you, hear me speak one word, Sir Torm."

There was a force within Sir Sanpeur's eyes
Sir Torm dared not resist. "Speak on," he said.

"Your wife, my lord, is here, and in my care;
She came to me scarce knowing what she did,—
Wounded, and driven to a wild despair
By your quick anger, which has stamped its seal
Upon the perfect beauty of her face.

The cause of that fierce blow she told me not;
Be what it may, I know full well, my lord,
It could not merit such a harsh retort
To wife whose loyalty and troth to you
Have been the marvel of the court; whose name,
Her beauty notwithstanding, has been held
As high from stain as she has e'er held yours.
She has not failed to you until this hour,
When she was not herself for one brief space,
Mad with the fever in her heated brain.
You long have known I loved her,—none could well
Withhold the tribute of his life from her,—
And you must know, my lord, beyond all doubt,
I loved her with a love that honoured you
In thought, in word, in purpose, and in deed.
She came to me because her trust in me
Was absolute as knowledge that my love
Was measureless. I would not plead, Sir Torm,

Excuse for sin; alas! I know her act
Was most unworthy of her truer self.
But this I say — he should not blame her most
Who drove her to this deed against herself.
And I will tell you,—should it chance you fail
To know from your own knowledge of your wife,
Without the need of confirmation sure,—
That when her passionate, poor, wounded heart
Had time and strength to reassert itself,
Her memory, and truth to you as wife,
Enwrapt her once again, and she withdrew
E'en from the love that, trusting, she had sought.
She lay within my castle with my dames,
Resting, and waiting for the dawn of day,
When she had bade me lead her back to you,
That she might ask forgiveness for her fault.
Now, by my knighthood and the sign I wear,
I speak the truth, Sir Torm! — With my last breath

I pray you grant her pardon, for my sake,
Who die, to save you, of wounds meant for you."

His breath came slower. None beholding him
Could doubt him, for within his steadfast eyes,
Though growing dim with coming death, was that
The Order on his bosom symbolised.
Torm bowed before him, silent, with a sense
Of hallowed presence from beyond this earth.
Convinced of Sanpeur's truth, there flashed on him
The revelation of a better life
Than self-indulgence and the pride of arms;
And here, at last, before the passing soul,
Strong in its purity and in its peace,
He felt a new-born and a deep desire
For truer life than he had ever known.

After the whisper, "God shield Gwendolaine,"
The slow breath ceased.

With shrill and piercing cry
Gwendolaine broke the strange, benumbing trance
That had withheld her; rushing from the dames
And falling prone upon the silent form
That gave her heart no answering throb, she cried,
With voice grief-pierced and sorrow-broken, "Wait
For Gwendolaine, O Sanpeur! Wait for Gwendolaine,
And take her with you unto death!"

She lay
In silent desolation on his breast,
So still, awhile, they thought her spirit gone;
Then rose majestic in the dignity
Of her incomparable grief.

"Sir Torm,"
She said in tense, surchargèd tones, "Sanpeur
Has told but half the story; he forgot
To tell, as noble souls are wont to do,

The measure of his own nobility.
I came to stay, my lord, to be his wife,
His serving-maid, his mistress,—what he would;
I told him that I loved him beyond men;
I pleaded and entreated him, in vain,
To keep and hold me evermore. No word
Could move him, no allurement charm; he bade
Me wait the dawn and then return to you,
To beg you with humility for grace,
And pardon for my utter want of truth,
Complete forgetfulness of womanhood,
And wifely loyalty. My lord, Sir Torm,
I promised him! and by his silent corse,—
And with a broken heart,—I pray that you
Will grant me pardon, though you cast me off."

"My Gwendolaine," Torm answered quickly, moved
By an uplifting impulse in his soul,—

"For you are mine, whomever you may love,—
I know that Sir Sanpeur did speak the truth;
You have not sinned in deed; and though you sinned
In purpose, it was more my fault than yours;
I drove you to it, and would fain atone.
Return with me, and help me overcome,
And with my temper I will tilt, until
I die or kill it. By the Blood of Christ,
I swear to you that you shall love me yet;
For I will be,— God help me,— worthier."

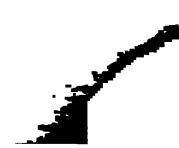
Back to their home she went with Torm, and strove
With gracious sweetness to make him forget;
To banish his keen memory of her love
For Sir Sanpeur, not by disproving it,
But by new proving of new love for him.
The greater made her rich to give the less;
She, being more, had still the more to give.

The apocalyptic vision granted her
Of Love immortal, vital and supreme,—
Kept by the grace of God all undefiled,—
Had dowered her with largess; what she gave,
Albeit not the utmost, was more worth
Than best had been from her starved soul before.

Sir Torm was helped in his self-given task—
To struggle with ill humours and with pride—
Far more by her new gentleness and grace
Than he had been by waywardness and scorn
And fitful fascination, as of old.
To help Torm was her life's new quest, and well
Did she essay to gain it.

When the tide
Of sorrow for Sanpeur would over-sweep
Her heart; and when, sometimes, Sir Torm would lapse

KATHANAL.



KATHANAL.

THE sky was one unbroken pall of gray,
Casting a gloom upon the restless sea,
Dulling her sapphire splendour to a dark
And minor beauty. All the rock-bound shore
Was silent, save a widowed song-bird sang
Far off at intervals a mournful note,
And on the broken crags of dark gray rock
The waves dashed ceaselessly. Sir Kathanal
Stood with uncovered head and folded arms,
His soul as restless as the surging sea
Lashed into passion by the coming storm.
His helmet lay upon the sand; its crest,
A floating plume of deep-hued violet,
Was tossed and torn in fury by the wind

Until it seemed a thing of life. He stood
And watched it, only half aware at first
That it was there, then scarce aware of aught
Besides the plume. As in the room of death
Some iterated sound or motion holds
Attent the stricken mind, benumbed, and keeps
The horror of its grief awhile at bay
As by a spell, so now, though Kathanal
Had sought the sea-shore to be free of men
Because of his sore agony of heart,
And all the passion of his daring soul
Was tossing like the sea in fierce revolt,
His thoughts and gaze were centred on his crest.
Before the gray of sea and sky he saw
Naught but the waving, waving of the plume;
Before the vision of his love, Leorre,
Her tender eyes aglow with changeless light,

The golden splendour of her sunny hair,
Her winning smiles of grace and sweetness blent,
There came the waving, waving of the plume;
Between his sorrow and his weary soul,
Between his trouble and his clear-eyed self,
There came the waving, waving of the plume;
Until he felt, in some half-conscious way,
It was his heart, and he a stranger there
That looked down, from a height, indifferent
Upon it at the mercy of the wind.

Sudden, with that long lingering trace of youth
That gave to him the fascinating charm
Which other men were fain to emulate,
He quickly stooped, and tore it from his helm,
And cast it far out on the tossing sea.
It lighted on the waves a purple bird,
Floating with swan-like grace before the wind.

The action quenched impatience. Kathanal,
Impulsive, passionate and sensitive,
In moods was ever ready with response
To omen and to change of circumstance.
He stood a moment, and then forward sprang
To catch it ere it vanished out of reach.
It was too late—the outward-flowing tide
Bore it from wave to wave beyond his sight.

"Ah, God!" he cried aloud, "what have I done?
It is the omen of a curse to me;
My crest is gone, my knightly symbol lost,
My helm dishonoured through an act of mine."

Then came the memory of early youth,
The recollection of a high resolve
To keep his manhood free from touch of stain,
To be a knight like Galahad, pure and true.

So few short years had passed since that resolve,
And yet he had forgotten loyalty
And truth and honour for the fair Leorre,
The wife of Reginault, his patron knight,—
The brave old man who treated him as son.
Long had he loved her with a knightly love,
And fought for her, and chosen her the queen
Of many a tournament. She still was young,
Fairer than morning in the early spring.
When she had come, a gladsome bride, to grace
The castle of old Reginault, and warm
His grand old spirit into youth again,
Sir Kathanal had bowed before her, saying,
"My gracious lady, take me as your knight";
And she had answered, with her winning smile,
"You are Sir Reginault's, and therefore mine."

Well had he loved her from that very hour,
Giving her honour as his old friend's bride,
Making the castle ring with merriment
To do her service, and fulfil the hest
Of Reginault, who bade him use his grace
To make her life a round of holidays.
But day by day his selfish love had grown
From friendly service to a lover's claim,
Until he had forgotten Reginault
In her fair eyes, and all things else but her,
Who granted him no boon, no smallest act
Of love or tenderness.

At last the strife
Between deep yearning for some touch of love,
And brave endeavour for self-mastery,
Had driven him to madness and despair.
To the lone sea he brought his agony

To face it boldly, and his spirit, quick
To wear new moods, caught a despondent gloom
From the dark omen that oppressed his soul.

"Love is divine," he said, "and it is well
To love Leorre, wife though she be, for love
Is free to noble natures; but at last,
When in her shining eyes I see response,
Albeit unconscious, to my longing pain,
I cannot rest content with boonless love,
Although divine. I fear me, if I stay
Within the circle of her tempting charm,
I shall, through some wild impulse, wantonly
Fling my unsullied knighthood to the winds,
As now I flung the plume from out my helm."

He went at even-song time to Leorre,
And told her of his struggle by the sea,
Of his determined purpose and resolve.

"Leorre, I love you with a love unsung
By poets, and unknown by other men,
Undreamed by women; I must leave you, dear;
I cannot see you fair for Reginault,
I cannot watch your sweetness not for me.
I will go far upon some distant quest
Until this frenzy ceases, and the quest
Shall be for you, my love, for you alone.

"Dear, sunny head that lights my darkened way
With its bright, golden glory, let me seek
A crown that well befits it for my quest.
Fair waist that curves beneath the heart I love,
I shall engirdle you with priceless gems
Won by my prowess for your perfect grace.
O wondrous neck! great lustrous, flawless
pearls,
That shall be royal in their worth, to match

The white enchantment of your beauty fair,
Shall be my quest for you.

"I will not come
Back to the court of Constantine, Leorre,
Until I bring that which shall honour you,
And winning which, I shall have cooled my pain."

She came and knelt beside him, took his hand,
Looked deep into his ardent eyes,—her own
Like stars that shone into his inmost soul.

"Will you, indeed, go forth," she answered low,
"Across the world upon a quest for me?
And will you falter not, nor swerve, nor fail,
Nor turn aside from seeking, night nor day,
Until you conquer with your prowess rare
The prize for me? And may I choose the quest
I most desire?"

"Ah! surely, what you will,"
Said Kathanal, as echo to his eyes,
Which answered ere the words could form themselves.

She waited, silently; the room was still;
Sir Kathanal was faint from drinking deep,
With thirsty eyes, the beauty of her face.

At last she spoke, almost inaudibly,
But evermore the thought of her low speech
Made melody within his memory.

"Go forth, my knight of love, o'er land and sea,
And purify your spirit and your life,
And seek until you find the Holy Grail,
Keeping the vision ever in your thought,
The inspiration ever in your soul.
Let Tristram yield his loyalty and honour

For fair Isoud, and die inglorious,—
Let Launcelot in Guenever's embrace
Forget the consecrated vows he swore,
And bring dark desolation on the land,—
My knight must grow the greater through his love,
The better for my favour, the more pure!
More than all gifts, or wealth of royal dower,
I want, I crave, I claim this boon of thee."

Between the bronze-brown of his eyes and her,
There sudden came a faint and misty veil;
Through the wide-open window a sun's beam
Flashed on it, making o'er her bowèd head
A halo from his own unfallen tears.
He rose and lifted her, loosed her sweet hands,
And fell upon his knees low at her feet.

"Leorre, my love, my queen, my woman-saint,
I am not worthy, but I take your quest;
I will not falter and I will not swerve
Until I see the Grail, or pass to where
I see the glory it but symbols here,
In Paradise. Beloved, all the world
Is better for your living, all the air
Is sweeter for your breathing, and all love
Is holier, purer, that you may be loved."

"Rise, Kathanal, stand still and let me gaze
Upon you with that purpose in your face!
So brave, so resolute! I love you, Kathanal!
Nay! do not touch me, listen to my words!
Surely it cannot be a sin to speak,
Perchance it is a debt I owe my knight
For his life's consecration, once to say
To him, as I have said to my own heart,
Just how I love him.

"I would follow you
Across the world, if it might be, a slave,
To serve you at your bidding night and day;
Or I would rouse me to my highest pride
That I might be your queen, and lead you on
To glory. I am strong to do and bear
The uttermost my mind can think, for you,
To cheer you, help you, strengthen you; and yet—
I am a woman, and my senses thrill
If you but touch the border of my robe,
And if you take my hand, before the court,
And raise it to your lips, I faint, I die,
With the vast tide of my unconquered love."

"Great Christ! how can I hear you and depart?
I did not know you loved me. O my sweet,
Here by your side I stay; my quest shall be
The love-light dawning in your shining eyes."

"Is this your answer, Kathanal," she sighed,
"To the unveiling of my heart of hearts?
No! now, if ever, you will surely go
On the sole quest that makes that action right."

"Leorre, come once to me!" he said with arms
Outstretched to her. Quickly she backward drew
With one swift whispered "Kathanal!"

"Leorre,
You cannot love and be so calm and still;
My soul would sacrifice both earth and heaven
For one full, rapturous kiss from those sweet lips
That lure me on to madness by their spell."

"It is my love that keeps me calm," she said;
"Love makes us strong for what is bitterest;
Were we faint-hearted through imperfect love
We could not part; but loving perfectly
We are full strong for that, and all things else.

"Farewell, my Kathanal, take as you go
This spotless scarf, the girdle from my robe,
And put it where the purple plume has been,
And wear it as my favour in your helm.
If that lost plume was darksome omen ill,
Let this defy it with an omen fair,
A prophecy to spur you on your quest.
My heart says it is better as it is;
I joy me that you flung into the sea
That purple plume my loving, longing gaze
Has often followed in the tournament.
Remember, purple doth betoken pain,
And white betokens conquest, purity;
Look, Kathanal, beloved, in my eyes!
I *know* that you will find the Holy Grail."

She stood immaculate, and from those eyes
That oft had kindled passionate desire

He drew an inspiration high and pure,
A prescient sense of victory and peace;
And falling on his knees once more, he bowed,
Kissed her white robe, and left her standing there.

Then followed days of struggle and dark gloom.
Far from the court he found a lonely cell,
Where morn and night he prayed, and, praying, wrought
A score of earnest, unrecorded deeds
To purify and cleanse himself from sin.

Oft the old passion would arise and sweep
His spirit bare of every conquest. Once
The longing and the yearning were so great,
So strong beyond all thought of holiness,
He sprang up from his bed at dead of night
And stopped not, night nor day, until he reached
His old home by the sea, and saw Leorre.

Her hair had its untarnished golden glow,
Her beauty was unchanged, but her sweet mouth
Had caught a touch of pathos in its smile;
She wore a purple robe, and stood in state
Beside Sir Reginault,— who greeted him
With tender, grave, and kind solicitude,—
And lifted eyes that smote upon his heart
With a long gaze of passionate appeal
That held a pain at bay deep in their depths.

"So weak," he whispered to his heart, "for self,
I will be strong for her; she needs my strength."

Again he hurried from her sight, half glad
For the remembered pain within her eyes;
Ashamed of his own soul that it was glad.

For years he struggled, prayed, and fought his fight;
And sometimes when his soul was desolate

And he was weary from his eager quest,
When such a sense of deep humility
Would fall upon his praying, watching heart
That he would fain forego all in despair,
A marvellous ray of light, mysterious,
Would slant athwart the darkness of his cell,
Then he would rouse him to his quest once more
And say, "Perchance the Holy Grail is near!"

One night at midnight came the ray again,
And with it came a strange expectancy
Of spirit as the light waxed radiant.
The cell was filled with spicy odours sweet,
And on the midnight stillness song was borne
As sweet as heaven's harmony — the words,—
The same Sir Launcelot had heard of old,—
"Honour and joy be to the Father of Heaven."
With wide eyes searching his lone cell for cause

He waited: as the ray became more clear
And more effulgent than the mid-day sun,
He trembled with that chill of mortal flesh
Beholding spiritual things. At last—
Now vaguely as though veiled by light, and then
With shining clearness, perfectly—he saw
The sight unspeakable, transcending words.

Forth from his barren cell came Kathanal,
Strong and inspired, born anew for deeds.
Straightway he grew to be the bravest knight
Under King Constantine, since Sir Sanpeur;
The boldest in the battles for the right;
The kindest in his judgment of the wrong.
His eyes that held the vision of the Grail
Were ever clear to see and know the truth;
His lips that had been touched by holy chrism
Were strong to utter holy living words;

He sang of life in life, and life in death,
And taught the lesson that his heart had learned—
All love should be a glory, not a doom;
Love for love's sake, albeit bliss-denied.

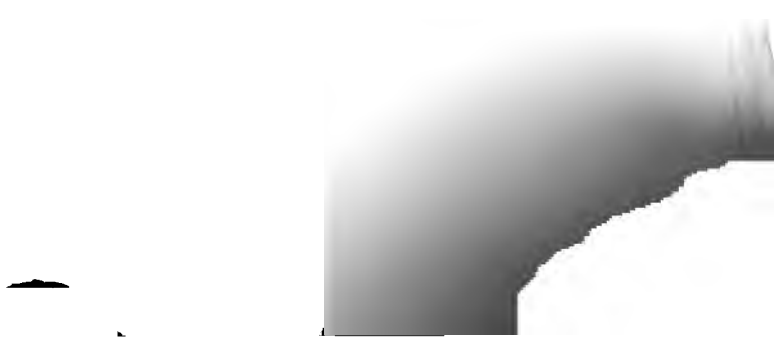
To his old home beside the sapphire sea
Floated his songs and his far-reaching fame;
For in the land no name was loved so well
As Kathanal the peerless Minstrel Knight.

Lone in her chamber sat Leorre, and heard
The songs of Kathanal by courtiers sung—
Arousing words, like a clear clarion call
To truth and virtue, purity and faith.
She clasped her hands and bent her head, and wept
In silent passion pent-up tears, for joy;
For now she knew—far off, beyond her sight—
Her love had seen the sacred Holy Grail.

And, as she listened, inspiration came,
Irradiating all her spirit, lifting it
Beyond her sorrow and her daily want
Of Kathanal. Soft through her soul there crept
The echo of a benedicite,
Enwrapping her in calm, triumphant peace.

Then she arose, put on her whitest robe,
And went out radiant, strong, and full of joy.

CHRISTALAN.



CHRISTALAN.

THE yellow sunlight, coming from the east,
Through the great Minster windows, arched and high,
That tell the story of our blessed Lord
In colours royal with significance,
Takes many hues, and falls upon the head
Of a fair boy before the altar-rail.
It is the son of the brave knight Noël,
Cut off, alas! too early in his prime,
Now lying dead beneath yon sculptured stone,
But living in the hearts of the small group
In the old Minster on this sunny morn.
The proud young head is bowed in reverence
Before the holy priest of God, whose face

Is glowing with paternal love that shines
Through dignity of the official calm.
Who loves not Christalan for his blithe grace? —
For his dear eyes, so true, so fathomless,
So full of tenderness, his mother thought
They were the reflex of the steadfast love
She bore her lord Noël? Who loves him not
For his bright joyance and his laughter sweet?

But now he stands, all merry laughter stilled
By awe that groweth slowly in his eyes,
In silent quietude, a knightly lad,
Clad in a doublet of unspotted white,
Embroidered at the breast with these two words,
Wrought by his mother's hand, *Valiant and True.*
He hears at last the stirring words that move
His soul as it has never yet been moved;
Words that have haunted his imagining

For days and nights, making his young heart yearn
With restless longing for this present hour;
Words that presage the glory of his life,
The consecrated purpose of his youth
In its fulfilment and accomplishment;
The holy, sacred, solemn, early vow
Of future knighthood for the noble lad.
And now his father's sword is shown to him;
His daring spirit, of a knightly race,
Leaps out to grasp it, though his hand may not
Until he grows to manhood. O the years
That he must wait, and serve, and work for that!
Why is it not to-morrow? He is strong,
And, never having seen the great, wide world,
With boyish confidence, that is the germ
All undeveloped of man's later strength,
He feels he is its master. For a space
The altar and the holy man of God

Are veiled before his earnest, searching gaze,
By sudden picture which his fancy paints:
He sees a tournament, himself a knight —

"God's peace be with thee, valiant boy and true;
In the name of God the Father, and of the Son
And of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

No tilt
Nor tournament before his vision now,—
Swift in his boyish heart, so full of dreams
Of fame, there springs a new, intense resolve
Of consecration, an unconscious prayer
For God's peace, though he knows not what it means.

The Lady Agathar stands, robed in black,
Behind the buoyant boy she loves so well.
She still has youth, and beauty, and desire;
But each full throb of her true, wifely heart

Beats for her lord, though he be gone,—all else
In life is naught to her but Christalan,
And Greane, the winsome maiden by her side.

Sweet Greane's heart thrills with pride of
Christalan,
And with the spirit of the solemn scene;
But, also, with a fierce rebellious pang,
That she is but a useless, silly girl.
She wishes she too had been born a lad,
To take the knightly vow, and leave the home,
And go forth to the world and its delight.

Now Christalan turns from the altar-rail
To see the love upon his mother's face.
Back to the castle, in a goodly train,
They take their way, in joyous merriment
And festal cheer.

733572 A

A banquet for the lad
Is given in the hall, where gather soon
The Noël-garde retainers, come to greet
The noble boy, and say a long farewell.

The Lady Agathar still smiles, and fills
The moment with all pleasure and delight;
No shadow of her sorrow or her pain
Shall fall upon her Christalan to-day;
But deep within her heart she maketh moan,
"My Christalan goes forth to-morrow morn."

Amid the revel Greane and Christalan
Are missing for a time from the gay feast,
And Agathar's quick eyes have followed them
To where they sit apart, the two young heads,
Of golden beauty and of softest brown,
Forming a picture that for evermore

Her memory will hold to solace grief,
Or make it greater, as her mood may be.

"O Christalan! how can I let you go?"
Says sweet Greane, weeping. "Who will climb with me
The rocks to find the bird's nest? who will play
At arms, forgetting that I am a girl,
And helping me forget it?"

Christalan,
Lifting the nut-brown curl to find her ear,
Low whispers tenderly, "I love you, Greane,
A hundred times more than were you a boy,
And always have, e'en when I laughed at you."

Greane nestles to him, lays her pretty head
Upon his breast; her slender shapely hand,
Sun-browned and thorn-scratched, wanders lovingly

Over his face and hair,— then to the words
Upon his doublet, tracing thoughtfully
Their broidered curving with her forefinger,

"*Valiant and True*," she says: "My Christalan,
When you are great and famous in the world,
Which would you be, could you be only one?"

"Why, Greane, they go together, like the light
And morning: no knight could be really true
And not be valiant to the death; and yet,
No valiant knight could live and not be true."

"But if you *could* be only one?" says Greane,
With child's persistency.

Quickly he starts,
Throws back his head impatiently, replies,
"I would be valiant, could I be but one."

"O Christalan, *I* would be true," says Greane.

"Well, Greane, you teased me into saying it
So do not look so scornful! I should die
If I could not exalt my father's name
In valiant deeds of knighthood and of war.
You have to choose, for you are but a girl:
I need not choose, thank God! I will be both."

When the gray morning dawned at Noël-garde,
The Lady Agathar went to her son;
It was the last good-morrow they would say
For many years to come. At the sun's rise
He was to leave his home, to take his way
To the brave knight Sir Kathanal, to whom
Sir Noël, dying, had bade Agathar
Send the young Christalan, in time, to learn
The code of chivalry and knighthood. Back
She drew the curtains of his bed, and watched
Him sleeping, bent and kissed him:

"Christalan,
Awake!" she said, "the day is breaking! Soon
You leave your home where now you rule as lord,
Boy though you are, and go as servitor;
You must fulfil my heart's desire, my son,
And, by God's help, bring answer to my prayers;
You must be true and valiant, Christalan."

"Why, mother mine, is it not wrought in gold
Upon my doublet?"

"Ah, my son," she said,
"It must be wrought upon your heart as well
As on your doublet."

Quick he answered her,
"How can I help be valiant and most true,
With such a father and your peerless self
My mother? No, I will not fail, be sure.
Some day I shall come riding home to you

With honour, prizes, fame, and dignity,
That shall befit my father's noble name,
And all the court as I pass by will cry,
'Sir Christalan, the Valiant and the True!'"

"But, Christalan, first comes a time when you
Must serve, and work, and cheer for other knights;
No knight is fully worthy to command
Until he knows the lesson to obey;
No ruler can be great unless he learns
With dignity to be a servitor.
The least shall be the greatest, the most true
In all things, howe'er small, shall be at last
Most valiant. Will you serve as well, my son,
As now you hope to conquer?"

"Mother mine,
Nothing will be too hard for me, I know,
With knighthood at the end. If that should fail,

I could not bear it! It will come at last!
When I shall hear the cry, that in our play
Sweet Greane is ever calling through the wood,
From all the court, and even from the King,
'Sir Christalan, the Valiant and the True!'"

Eight years had passed. The Lady Agathar,
Unaged, unchanged, in her plain robe of black,
Sat in her tower, watching for her son.
Fair Greane was with her, tall, and full of grace,
Right glad at last that she was born a maid.

They talked together of that day, gone by,
When Christalan first left them. They had heard
How nobly, to the pride of Noël-garde,
He bore his days of service; how, as squire,
He was the favoured of Sir Kathanal;
How keen and living his ambition was

To prove the motto of his boyish choice.
And it was near; the mother's heart was glad
That, ere the week was ended, Christalan
Would be the knight his heart had longed to be.
His maiden shield, waiting his valour's right
To grave it as his doublet had been wrought,
And his bright armour were in readiness
For the long vigil by his arms, alone
Before the altar in that sacred place,
The holy Minster, where his father slept.
First he would come, that she might bless her son.
Well did she comprehend the happiness
In his brave heart to-day; the early vow
That stirred the boy so deeply, long ago,
Was near its confirmation! His intense
And solemn longing for the watch at night;
His ardent joy in knighthood, won at last,—
She shared before she saw him, with that sense

Of subtle sympathy a mother, only, knows.
She spoke her thoughts aloud in pride-thrilled tones—

"Almost a knight, my Greane, is Christalan;
How valiant, faithful, noble he has been,
And will be ever, my true-hearted son!"

"Greane! Greane! they come! I see a dusty cloud
That hides and heralds the approach of men.
Look, is it Christalan? They come more near,
Nearer and nearer! God in Heaven! Greane,
What is it that they bring? Not Christalan?
O no; that silent form they bear so slow
Can not, and must not, be my Christalan!
Come, Greane, and contradict my eyes for me."

Greane's answer was a swift, confirming swoon.

Up through the gates they bore her Christalan,
Dressed in the garments of the neophyte,
That erst were spotless white, but then were soiled,
Bedraggled and dust-stained. His golden hair
A matted mass, of sunny curls unkempt,—
And yet how beautiful he was withal!
Into the hall they brought and laid him down,
While Agathar gave thanks, from her despair,
That death had not yet conquered him. He lived,
Although he spoke not, moved not, scarcely breathed.

They told her, in few words, of his brave deed.
In some lone mountain way, far from the court,
He saw a knight almost unhorsed by fraud,
And springing quickly to the knight's relief,
Unarmed, unready, without thought of self,
He had been trampled by the maddened horse,
Whose master he had saved unfair defeat.

The leech had tended him with greatest care,
Promised him life, but never more, alas!
The power to wield his sword, or wear his arms,
The strength to walk, or run, or live the life
Of manhood as men prize it. Some deep hurt,
Beyond the sight, would ever foil his strength,
And make bold effort perilous to life.
They told her how he whiter grew, at this,
And, with the one word, "Noël-garde," had passed
Into the trance, like death, that held him thus
Through all the journey they had carried him.
"My valiant boy," said Lady Agathar;
And hushed her heart, to minister to him.

Slowly, at last, the lovely eyes unclosed
The speaking beauty of their dark-blue depths,
To meet his mother's with beseeching gaze.

"I can be true, but never valiant now,"
He said in faltering accents. "Mother mine,
There is no knight for you and my sweet Greane.
God help me!" and he turned him to the wall.

"O Christalan! my son," she answered him,
"Knighthood is in the spirit and the soul;
The deeds that show the knighthood to the world
Are but the chance and circumstance of fate;
And no knight could be truer than you proved
Yourself in self-forgetting, nor more brave
Than in foregoing knighthood for a knight.
You will be far more valiant, if you bear
This sorrow without murmur or complaint,
Than you could prove in any battle won.
The meanest varlet often wins by chance.
It needeth valour like our blessed Lord's
To forfeit glory, and to suffer pain

Unhonoured and unknown — ah, Christalan,
True knight within my heart I hold you, dear."

"Yea, mother mine, but now my father's name
Remains without fresh glory; his last prayer
And dying wishes must be unfulfilled."

"Sweet Christalan, when you were scarce a lad,
You saw the King and thought his shining crown
His royalty, which now you know is naught
But symbol of it. Thus your father, dear,
In larger life of knowledge of the truth,
Knows that the boon he prayed was but the sign.
'T is yours, now, to fulfil the higher prayer;
'T is yours to gain the inward grace, and leave
The outward sign, great in its way, but less."

"Your words are like the first flush of the dawn
In the dark night, my mother, bringing light

To show more plain the lingering dark. O God,
It is so dark and bitter! How can you,
Yea, even you, begin to understand?
You never were a man — almost a knight."

"But I have been a mother," she replied
In tones so strange he roused to look at her,
And saw his sorrow's kinship in her eyes.
He drew her arm beneath his head, and slept.

They noursled him to outward show of strength,
With care and love, the best of medicines.
A brighter day now dawned for Noël-garde
With his home-coming, notwithstanding grief.
What tales there were to tell of the great court,
Of his long service with Sir Kathanal,
To which Greane listened with quick, bated breath,
Sharing each feat and play with Christalan
As he relived it for her.

"List ye, Greane,"
He said one day with ardour of brave youth
Aglow for bravery; "I met a man
Who once had seen the great Sir Launcelot,
And told me of him. How he prayed and prayed
Within the cloister; all his deeds of war,
Of prowess, and renown, were naught to him,
Though men bowed low in goodly reverence
As he walked by; and some, 'the foolish ones,'
The man said, yet they seem not so to me,
Stooped down and kissed the footprints that he left.
Although he wore but simple gown of serge,
With girdle at the waist, like any monk,
One felt, with passing glance, he had a power
Unconquerable in reserve, to swift
O'ercome whate'er approached him, if he would.

And, Greane, bend down and let me speak to you:
I saw at Camelot the great white tomb
Of sweet Elaine, and not in all the court
Saw I a maiden half so fair as she.
She lies there carved in marble, pure and white;
And, by our blessed Lord, my heart is sure
That, were she living, I should love her well."

"O Christalan! you would not love a maid
That lost her maiden pride and dignity,
Giving her love unasked?" said Greane, in scorn.

"Alas, Greane! have you, hidden from the world,
Learned the world's jargon and false estimates?
Do you not know that love is more than pride,
And beating heart more than cold dignity?
Men die for glory, and you all applaud.
Elaine's love was her glory; honour her
That she did die for it. That she could tell

Her story fearlessly to all the court
But proves her high, unconscious purity."

"Well," said fair Greane, with laughter in her eyes,
"I straight will die for the next noble knight
Who comes to Noël-garde to rest awhile,
And you shall put me on a gilded barge,—
I will not have a solemn bed of black!—
And our old servitor shall deck—"

"Peace, Greane!"
Said Christalan, in tones that frightened her,
Who knew no sound from him but tenderness.
"Dare not to jest about that holy maid,
Too pure to fear, too true to hide her heart."

Then there were tales to tell of the great King
Who passed in such a wondrous mystery
From out the realm; and of King Constantine,

"Who may not be like great King Arthur,
Greane,
But who deservedly has right to wear
The crown he wore; for he is brave and strong,
Mighty in battle, bountiful in peace,
To each brave knight a friend, and to the weak
As I, who never knew a father, think
A father might be.

"When I saw him first,
He asked, 'Are you Sir Noël's son — the knight
Who, with the mighty King (peace to his soul!),
Landed at Dover, and there fought so well?'
Abashed I answered, 'Yea, my liege'; but he
Laid his great hand, that has a jagged scar
Half-way across it, on my arm and said,
'Be not afraid; I was your father's friend,
And will be yours, if you are worthy him.'

"Often thereafter would he speak to me
So graciously, I for a time forgot
He was a king, and answered him as free
From fear or shyness as I answer you;
Told him my thirst for knighthood and for fame,
To which he listened with that strange grim smile,
So like a sunbeam in a rocky place.
Then, straightway, as I watched him, in his eyes
There came the look that made me want to kneel,
Remembering he was a king indeed.
I love him, Greane; I—"

Christalan turned quick
His face away, and strove to hide the pain
That held him in its sharp and sudden grasp;
Pain of the flesh, that was but less than pain
Of heart, that it should keep him from his King,
And knightly service worthy of his name.

Greane spoke not, but she understood, and
crept
Close to his side, finding his cold white hand,—
The laughter turned to tears within her eyes.

Great was his love for Greane, but greater far
His love for Agathar. Born of his pain,
A strange dependence tinged pathetically
The proud possession of his trust as guard
Of her reft life and lonely widowhood.
He waited for her coming in the morn
With flowers he had gathered ere she woke;
At night he led her to her chamber door,
With boyish homage touched with stately grace,
And Agathar said to her widowed heart,
"How like his father in his courtesy!"
Often she kissed him, whispering the while,
"Beloved Christalan, my more than knight,

You bear your bitter lot so patiently.
Thank God you are so valiant and so true!"

Slowly the shadow on his way grew less
Eclipsing; the brave spirit that was ripe
For doing deeds came to fulfil itself
In the far harder task of doing naught;
The courage ready for activity
But changed its course, as he forebore and smiled.
And yet he oft would hasten from the sight
Of Greane and Agathar, and seek the wood,
Where he was hidden from the tender eyes
So quick to see his struggle. Lying prone
Upon the grass, he stretched his fragile form
Its fullest length to cheat himself with thought
That he was stalwart; then he closed his eyes
To generous summer's lavish golden glow
Of shimmering sunshine playing everywhere,

And the fair world of beauty, flowering;
Shut from his hearing caroling of bird,
The liquid rhythm of rivulet, the song
Of wind amid the tree-tops, all the notes
Of nature's melody; and heard alone,
With inward ear, the clanging clash of arms
And shouts of victory. Through the long hours
He lay and fought his fight imaginary,
To rise, more wan, to wage his war with pain.

One morning, when the sun rose, he was far
From Noël-garde. He had gone out to seek
The wayside lilies, fresh with early dew.
From the deep shadow of the wood he heard
A troop of mailèd horsemen cry a halt
Just in the path before him. In low tones
They talked of a dark plot to kill the King.

The heart of Christalan, that beat so faint,
And oft so wearily, beat fast and strong
In anxious listening. It was a band
Of outlawed robbers, rebels to the King,
Who planned to lay at the great undern hunt
A trap for the brave, unsuspecting King,
Spring on him unawares, and take his life,
And have revenge for justice done to them.

His King! they spoke about his noble King,
Then in the old court castle near his home,
For a brief resting on his journey north.

He leaned against a gnarled and twisted oak,
His soul a listening intensity,
And all his strength seemed leaving him; he drew
A quick and stifled breath of sharpest pain,

As they rode on, and thought of Agathar,
Watching and waiting for his coming home.

"Yes, I can save him; God be thanked for that.
I now may do one valiant deed and die."

It was a long way to the court, through dense
Unbroken forest, with a single path
Trodden between the trees; he had no horse,
No strength, and little time before the deed—
The dreadful deed—be done. Not since his hurt
Had he walked fast, or far, without great pain;
Now it will follow every step he takes—
But what is that, he goes to save his King!

Prepared to brave the pain, all stealthily
He started from the shadow of the trees;
When suddenly two of the bandit band

Came riding back again, ere he could hide—
The one had dropped his javelin and returned
To seek it. Heavy coats of mail incased
The stalwart frames scarce needing a defense,
So strong they were.

Silent stood Christalan
And faced their coming, not a trace of fear
Or tremor in his bearing, slight and frail
In his white doublet, holding in his hand
The wayside lilies he forgot to drop,
Which to the Lady Agathar shall come,
Alas! without his greeting or his kiss.

"Ho!" cried the bandits. "Eavesdropping? By hell
And all the devils! we will slash his tongue
Too fine to tell our secrets, if he heard!
Speak, man, or die! Heard you our converse
now?"

"Strike, ye base cowards," answered Christalan.
"I am unarmed, alone, and weaponless;
I cannot wield the sword, nor wear my helm,
But God is with me to defend me now,
So strike against His power, if you dare!"

The sunlight, slanting westward through the trees,
Fell first upon his lifted, golden head,
Making a shining helmet of his curls,
And then upon the lilies in his hand;
His eyes had a defiant, fearless glow;
Against the sombre background of the wood,
He looked scarce human.

"Mother of our Lord!"
In frightened breath, the bandit rebels cried.
"It is a spirit; no mere mortal man
Would stand and face us boldly so, unarmed.

Look at the Virgin's lilies in his hand!
Great God, preserve us, save us from our doom!"

And turning in a panic of swift fear,
They vanished quickly through the shadowed wood,
While Christalan sped on to save his King.

He sees the castle, and he hears the horn
That calls the court together for the hunt;
His strength is failing, and his heart grows faint.
Quick, ere it cease to beat! Faster, more fast!
O but to save his noble lord! One swift,
Last run, and he has reached them; breathlessly
He stands before the charger of the King,
With arms uplifted and imploring eyes,
Until words come, between sharp gasps of pain.
"Go not, my liege, upon the hunt to-day,
I pray you, for the glory of the realm."

With cheeks that paled and flushed, and panting
breath,
He told his story in disjointed words,
And, with unconscious frank simplicity,
The tale of his high courage on the way,
To prove, what it had proved to his own
heart,
The care of God to shield his lord the King.
Then he fell prostrate at the great King's feet,
And tired life ebbed fast to leave him rest.

He lies amid the hushed and silent court,
The faded lilies still within his hand;
And with his weary, dying eyes he sees
The sword of Constantine above his head,
Giving, at last, the royal accolade,
While the King's face is full of yearning love;
And with his dying ears he hears the words,

That he has bravely striven to resign,
"Sir Christalan, my True and Valiant knight,"

And then the murmur from the assembled court,
"Sir Christalan, the Valiant and the True;
God speed the soul of our beloved knight,
Sir Christalan, the Valiant and the True."

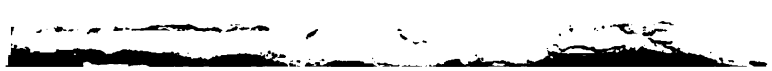
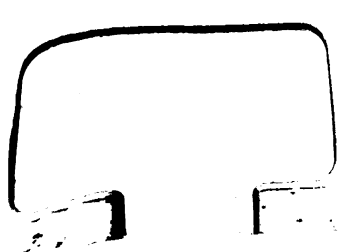
NOTE TO PAGE 88.

"In the midst of the blast entred a sunne beame more clear by seaven times then ever they saw day, and all they were alighted of the grace of the holy Ghost."

. . . . . .

"Then there entred into the hall the holy grale covered with white samite, but there was none that might see it, nor who beare it, and there was all the hall fulfilled with good odours."

. . . . . .

"Then he listned, and heard a voice which sung so sweetly, that it seemed none earthly thing, and him thought that the voice said, 'Joy and honour be to the Father of heaven.'"

SIR THOMAS MALORY, "*La Mort d'Arthure.*"